

Benjamin West

Benjamin West was born in Springfield, Pennsylvania (now Swarthmore) on October 10, 1738 as the tenth child of an innkeeper. Benjamin West was an autodidact. While excelling at the arts, "he had little [formal] education and, even when president of the Royal Academy, could scarcely spell." (Hughes, 70) From 1746 to 1759, West worked in Pennsylvania painting portraits while fostered by the provost of the College of Philadelphia, Dr. William Smith. Also, during this time West met John Wollaston, a famous painter who immigrated from London. West picked up on many of Wollaston's techniques dealing with the shimmer of silk and satin as well as some of "his mannerisms, the most prominent of which was to give all his subjects large almond-shaped eyes, which clients thought very chic." (Hughes, 71) In 1759, he moved to Italy where he expanded his repertoire by copying the works of Italian painters such as Titian and Raphael.

In 1763, West moved to England, where he was commissioned by King George III to create portraits of members of the royal family. He painted his most famous, and possibly most influential painting, *The Death of General Wolfe*, in 1770, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1771. Although originally snubbed by Reynolds and others as over ambitious, the painting became one of the most frequently reproduced images of the period. In 1772, King George appointed him historical painter to the court. West became friends with the English portraitist Sir Joshua Reynolds and founded the Royal Academy of Arts with Reynolds in 1768. He was the second president of the Royal Academy from 1792 to 1805. He was re-elected in 1806 and was president until his death on March 11, 1820. He was Surveyor of the King's Pictures from 1791 until his death.

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